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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 006486

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA AND DRL
NSC FOR SHANNON AND MADISON
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TREASURY FOR OASIA-LAMONICA

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: SUCCESSFUL NATIONAL WORK
STOPPAGE

Classified By: Charge Lisa Kubiske for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: A national work stoppage November 11, successfully organized by leftist groups and a few unions to protest deteriorating economic conditions and the government's economic policies, attracted wide participation and shut down businesses across the country. Although most cities remained very quiet, scattered confrontations left eight persons dead and some 34 injured. Some of the deaths resulted from police gunfire, but the casualties were relatively low in comparison with similar protests in the past. President Mejia, senior military officers, and political party leaders expressed sympathy with the public's frustration, supported their right to peaceful protest, and strongly discouraged violence. Security forces arrested at least 544 persons, many of whom were to be charged with disturbing the peace but were expected to be released shortly in accordance with law. It is unlikely the organizers will win fulfillment of their unrealistic demands. It is too early to know whether the event will influence the government's policies or the presidential election campaign in any way. End summary.

2. (U) A national work stoppage, or "general strike," took place across the Dominican Republic from 6:00 a.m. local November 11 to 6:00 a.m. local November 12. Led by a "Nacional Coordinador for Unity and Struggle" (Coordinadora Nacional para la Unidad y Lucha), participating or supporting organizations ranged from the Armed Front for Popular Struggle (FALPO, whose leader was arrested in Colombia for links with terrorists there) to the mainstream National Council of Labor Unity (Consejo Nacional de Unidad Sindical - CNUS). However, leaders of other mainstream labor groups, including the largest transport workers union, refused to support the stoppage.

3. (U) The protest was designed to show public frustration with rapidly rising living costs and widespread electric power outages in recent months. The organizers called on the GODR to raise the minimum wage, double salaries, restrain prices, and restore electricity within 30 days. The leaders also called for a debt moratorium and an end to the IMF program. In light of the widespread participation, they termed the strike "successful."

4. (C) Youths from some poorer neighborhoods burned tires and threw trash on roads to slow traffic, but in many cases traffic passed without incident. According to the National Police general in charge of investigations, police reacted violently only when surrounded or cornered by demonstrators who were throwing rocks and bottles or shooting. Police and army troops were deployed mainly in areas that had been prone to violence during past protests and by vulnerable public facilities such as bridges and banks. The scattered violent incidents, according to the National Police, left eight persons dead (including one policeman) and 34 wounded (including seven security force personnel). The armed forces chief, in comments to us, attributed five of the deaths to police gunfire -- the police gave us a lower figure -- and one to FALPO extremists. He noted that army troops performing police duties operated under strict rules of engagement. Three deaths occurred in greater Santo Domingo and the rest in interior towns.

5. (U) Before and during the stoppage, the President, political party leaders, and senior military officers expressed sympathy with the public's frustration over serious economic problems, acknowledged the right to protest peacefully, and strongly encouraged non-violence. At the same time, in an effort to prevent violence, the GODR announced deployment of all available police and army troops, especially in and around the capital city. The authorities emphasized that they were prepared for any contingency. Before and during the strike, security forces searched vehicles and their occupants for weapons. They arrested at least 544 persons, many of whom were to be charged with disturbing the peace and were expected to be released within 48 hours in accordance with law. Several protest organizers, arrested prior to the strike, were subsequently released

without being charged.

16. (C) Late on November 11, authorities noticed that some usually troublesome neighborhoods in the capital were quiet, apparently because they had electric power. Consequently, the government switched power distribution from affluent neighborhoods in the capital to other low-income areas in an effort to avert disturbances there. Note: Electricity supply has fallen sharply below demand in recent weeks. Much of the distribution is in government hands following the GODR's agreement with Union Fenosa. End note.

17. (U) The day after the strike, legislators disagreed on what should be done in response. Chamber of Deputies president Alfredo Pacheco (of the ruling PRD) called on the GODR to immediately review its policies in light of the strike, while Senate president Jesus Vasquez (PRD) asked the public to give the authorities time to make necessary changes. Secretary of Interior and Police Pedro Franco Badia said the government is disposed to have a dialog with the groups that organized the work stoppage, but noted that it would be impossible to double salaries for Dominican workers.

18. (C) Comment: President Mejia, who has often pointed to the "three years of labor peace" since he assumed office, has now had to cope with the first nationwide protest of his presidency. His predecessor, Leonel Fernandez (1996-2000), faced more such disruptions. Mejia gets kudos for upholding the human right of free speech and peaceable protests. We are still looking into the situation on the arrests. By historical standards, the violence this time was relatively limited and there have been few accusations that authorities used excessive force. While there was plenty of cause for discontent (something Mejia himself noted) and plenty of sympathy throughout the country for a peaceful protest, the success of the work stoppage also reflects good planning on the part of the organizers. They planned, and got, an event that called for support by essentially adding a fourth day to a long weekend without any requirement to march in the streets. Government fulfillment of their demands within 30 days, on the other hand, seems highly unlikely, both for the content (stabilizing the economy while raising all wages) and the timing (too close to Christmas). It is too early to know whether the event will influence the government's policies or the presidential election campaign in any way. End comment.

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